

Cooperative Approach Nets Great Environmental Results

Companies in Performance Track Program Voluntarily Implement Cleanup and Conservation Programs

By: Jimmy Palmer

Keys to effectively safeguarding public health – to achieving cleaner air and water -- are common sense and local involvement.

There is, of course, no substitute for tough enforcement of our nation's environmental laws and regulations, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency along with state and local governments go after polluters daily with stiff fines and with long jail sentences.

But there are additional incentives at the government's disposal – incentives that are designed to encourage even better environmental behavior from companies. Programs that provide creative incentives for cleaner air and water are now achieving environmental gains beyond those required by law.

One such initiative, the National Environmental Performance Track program, has just been selected for an "Oscar" of government prizes. Performance Track was named as one of 50 top programs in the country by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government. The recognition was for uniqueness, effectiveness, significance and potential for replication.

In an area like environmental protection where sticks are generally wielded to ensure compliance with our nation's environmental laws, Performance Track provides something that otherwise would be missing -- the great carrot. In a nutshell, Performance Track is a group of facilities which EPA has approved for special recognition of their environmental commitment.

In the Atlantic Southeast region, companies such as BMW Manufacturing Co. LLC, Blue Ridge Paper Products, Inc. , and Bridgestone/Firestone North American Tire, LLC. have earned Performance Track recognition for the past 5 years.

Companies trying to participate in the Performance Track program are carefully screened by EPA before acceptance into the program. Just to qualify, facilities must employ a comprehensive environmental management system to oversee their activities. They must commit to greater improvements in their environmental performance. And they must provide information to the local community. They also must undergo a thorough screening by EPA, states and the Department of Justice to assure a strong history of compliance with environmental laws and regulations. Some larger manufacturing facilities face literally thousands of compliance checkpoints on a regular basis. Experience has shown that no matter how diligent the facility, and how comprehensive its management systems, violations do occasionally occur. The program's screening criteria apply a common-sense approach that takes this reality into account.

Many who apply do not make the cut. Thus far, 140 applicants have not been accepted into the program; 49 members have been removed because they did not qualify or meet their membership obligations.

Why do companies even try for membership in the program? The greatest reward for these companies really is recognition for being a good environmental neighbor in their local communities. EPA and states also are developing additional, specific benefits that will reduce some of the routine transaction costs of regulation and allow these facilities to focus more on environmental results. At the same time, members are expected to provide more information on their overall environmental performance and management to EPA, states, and the public.

And the results for this voluntary program have been eye popping: Since the program's inception, members reduced total water use by 1.9 billion gallons and waste generation by more than 550,000 tons. They increased their use of recycled materials by nearly 120,000 tons. In 2004 alone, they reduced water use by more than half a billion gallons, set aside more than 1,000 acres for land conservation, and reduced air-pollution emissions by more than 3,000 tons. Those results would not have occurred using an enforcement approach alone.

Results like these, however, only tell part of the story. Performance Track encourages facilities in your town or state to take pride in helping to solve local problems. If the work of environmental protection is to achieve real results, it must be effective at the community level. And if changes are to be made, nine out of 10 times those changes must be made inside the gates of the very companies that have the greatest potential for creating pollution if mismanaged. Only by improving the level of environmental protection at the source – at a plant or facility in your community -- is progress possible that will provide real results for real people.

We anticipate that if the trend holds in the future -- as it has since Performance Track began -- we will continue to see environmental improvements throughout America that surpass the goals set in law, yielding gains that directly benefit citizens. Performance Track and programs like it will never replace the need for strict laws and tough enforcement. But as long as programs like Performance Track continue to protect public health and preserve natural resources, EPA will continue to provide such common-sense, extra carrots to those that deserve them.

Jimmy Palmer is the Atlantic Southeast regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.